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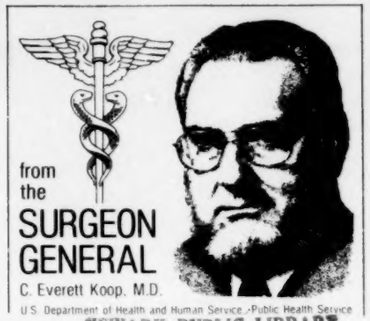

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Prenatal Care

It is important that you see a doctor or visit a clinic as soon as you think you may be pregnant. The sooner you have a pregnancy test and find out for sure that you are going to have a baby, the sooner you can begin proper prenatal care.

Prenatal care is the health care you receive before your baby is born. Prenatal care is especially important at the start of your pregnancy because your baby will be developing rapidly—more rapidly, I suspect, than most mothers realize. Were you aware that all of the baby's major organs will be formed during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and that your health behaviors during this period may have a significant effect on the baby?

During this important early time—and, of course, all the way through your pregnancy—your own good health is vital to your baby's healthy growth. That's why you should see a doctor or visit a clinic at the first sign of pregnancy. Women who start prenatal care early in their pregnancies tend to have fewer problems and to deliver healthier babies than do women who delay or who have no prenatal care at all. Even if you do not have the money, you should not delay seeking prenatal care at this most important time; financial arrangements can be worked out at the clinic or doctor's office.

During your first visit, which will probably take longer than later appointments, your doctor will give you a thorough physical examination and have a number of laboratory tests done to check for any possible health problems. The doctor also will question you about your medical history—especially about previous pregnancies and their outcome and about any chronic illnesses, such as high blood pressure or diabetes, that might need special attention.

Your pregnancy is bound to bring you some mixed emotions. And your feelings will change, perhaps many times, during the course of your pregnancy. Ask the doctor to explain the changes that are taking place in your body and how you can expect to feel. He or she will give you a care plan covering what you should do to assure a safe delivery and a healthy baby. You should eat the right foods and get the recommended amounts of rest and exercise. Stay away from substances that can harm you and your baby—alcohol, cigarettes and drugs or medicines your doctor didn't prescribe.

Don't hesitate to ask questions about anything you don't understand, and be sure to tell your doctor if you have any physical problems, if you are under stress or if you have any other special concerns. Your doctor needs to know how your pregnancy is affecting you and your family.

After your first prenatal visit, you'll be scheduled for regular obstetrical checkups—about once a month for the first six months, every two weeks during the seventh and eighth months and, most likely, once a week after that until the baby is born. During these visits, your weight, blood pressure and urine will be checked, and your abdomen will be measured to see how the baby is growing.

It's important that you keep all your checkup appointments. These examinations help insure that your pregnancy is progressing normally; and if a problem does occur your doctor can deal with it promptly. Between visits, if anything unusual should happen—something that you think or your doctor has told you might be a cause for alarm, such as spotting—be sure to let your doctor know right away.

Remember, your good health is vital to your baby's growth and development. So, take care of yourself, right from the start. See your doctor early and keep all followup appointments. Always ask any questions you may have and follow your care plan to give your baby a healthy start in life.

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